

LINK UP - REALISING THE POTENTIAL IN OUR COMMUNITIES

For decades, and despite millions of pounds of investment, Governments and public agencies have struggled to change the experience of many people living in Scotland's most disadvantaged communities. Problems of low life expectancy, low levels of employment and educational attainment persist. Link Up set-out to prove that creating the right conditions for change and the seemingly simple steps of working with what's good in a community and using social activities (e.g. gardening, cooking, arts, crafts, sport, music) to build relationships between local people, could start to turn this intractable position around.

Three years on (from August 2011), and drawing on the experience across ten communities and two independent studies of the impact of the programme, we have concluded that:

- Link Up works.
- Link Up is highly cost-effective.
- Link Up is contributing towards key Scottish Government policy objectives.
- Link Up can deliver sustainable change at a wider scale.

This short paper provides a summary of the cumulative learning from Link Up and considers the next steps for this important programme.

Link Up Works

Link Up *creates new social networks* (often including people who were isolated), *improves the health and wellbeing of local people* and gives them the confidence, motivation and skills to *effect positive change for themselves and increasingly, their community*.

By the end of August 2014, Link Up had produced the following outcomes for individuals across the initial ten local projects:

- Over 9,000 social connections that might otherwise not have been made
- Almost 600 people volunteering and helping others in their community
- 66% had never taken part in any other form of community activity¹
- 155 people who had previously been isolated participating
- 63% reporting feeling physically and mentally healthier¹
- 83% indicated they had strong skills post-involvement¹
- 56 secured employment (one after being redundant for 15 years)
- 302 gained a qualification or award
- 43 secured a university/college/traineeship place
- 89% thought their community was a good place to live (was 66% pre-involvement)¹

As these outcomes are driven by local people themselves rather than an external agency, this *materially increases the likelihood of them being sustainable*.

Link Up is also *delivering community-wide benefits* in some areas:

- Establishment of a national award-winning tenants and residents group;
- A community shop that sells affordable produce and is a social hub for local people;
- Increased use of community assets and a strengthening of groups that run them; and
- Emergence of a positive and growing community activism giving an increased voice to the views of local people.

The degree of positive change and increasing influence of local people has also been a *catalyst for new investment* in several of the Link Up communities: in four of the original ten, this investment has been at a similar scale to Link Up and is seeking to build on the foundations laid by the programme.

¹ ODS, Evaluation of the Link Up Programme, October 2014.

Link Up is Highly Cost-effective

In spring 2014, the economic consultancy Matrix was commissioned to undertake a preliminary examination of the monetary value of the impact of Link Up against its costs. Their analysis² illustrated that Link Up is **generating real net positive benefits for society**, a significant finding given public spending is continuing to be reined in. The results were as follows:

Costs of local delivery	Programme costs	Est. benefits excl. volunteering & participation & assuming 100% effectiveness	Break-even effectiveness required ¹ .	Est. benefits incl. volunteering & participation & assuming 100% effectiveness	Break-even effectiveness required ² .
£1.33m	£0.36m	£3.64m	46%	£6.00 million	28%
1. % of value of projected benefits, <u>excluding</u> volunteering and participation, needed to recover all costs. 2. % of value of projected benefits, <u>including</u> volunteering and participation, needed to recover all costs.					

Matrix calculated the economic benefits arising from Link Up by applying a monetary value to the outcomes highlighted above. They also quantified the well-being benefits associated with these outcomes and levels of individual participation and volunteering using an emerging technique which is increasingly gaining currency: the 'life satisfaction approach'.

Link Up is Contributing Towards Key Scottish Government Policy Objectives

Link Up is directly contributing towards Scottish Government policy objectives in:

- **Health** - building social capital and support networks which are helping people with complex needs including isolation, anxiety and mental health issues, but also triggering healthier lifestyle choices and increased resilience.
- **Regeneration** - helping people change for themselves (securing employment, gaining new skills, qualifications & experience) and empowering them to influence what happens in their community.
- **Safer Communities** - establishing social connections and community trust, making people proud of where they live and supporting them to look out for each other.

As already mentioned, a significant characteristic of this change is that it is being driven by local people not through a traditional top-down service delivery model. The change is also being effected by some of the hardest to reach individuals. The result of this is that **demand on public services is reducing and future spend prevented**.

Furthermore, the delivery of long-term sustainable improvement in Scotland's most deprived communities and a reduction in inequalities is a core objective for Government and all policy areas. The realisation of this objective will depend, to a substantial degree, on local people having the capacity to help themselves and each other where they can, and on empowering them to inform the nature of public and third sector service delivery.

This requires a level of 'organisation' within a community (both formal and informal) which often does not exist. However, Link Up has demonstrated that, increasing social connections and the establishment of new relationships between local people **creates an energy and provides the foundations on which this 'community organisation' can be built**. Often this is informal (i.e. it's not about committees and working groups), but it achieves this in a way that engages local people and works for them.

² http://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/media/37308/Link-Up-Break-Even-Report-by-Matrix_FINAL_170714.pdf



Link Up Can Deliver Sustainable Change at a Wider Scale

Link Up's impact on those who participate and volunteer with their local project is profound and increasingly, it is being felt at a wider community level. Equally, it is significant that this has been achieved from scratch, often by a single Link Up worker, with minimal local budget.

Our experience leads to two important conclusions:

- The 'right' type³ of community-based worker given the freedom to operate⁴ in a sustained way with local people, can catalyse material positive change.
- A scaling-up of the Link Up programme (spread and intensity) has the potential to make an important contribution towards tackling wider inequalities in Scotland.

The former strongly aligns with key elements of community development practice although, in recent years that practice has diminished in Scotland. Consequently, we support the Scottish Community Development Centre's recent proposals for a "coherent and strategic approach to community development at Community Planning Partnership level" and their call for increased investment by public agencies in "direct neighbourhood work" and "link work between public services and community interests and organisations"⁵.

In terms of the latter, Link Up is at a pivotal point in its development and the continued support of the Scottish Government and public sector bodies will be essential if the wider potential of Link Up is to be realised. This will require *a balance between exploring new delivery models (e.g. in partnership with public and third sector bodies) with the logical step of building on what we know works* (i.e. the current model and approach).

The Link Up model has the advantage of being able to reach and engage local people in a way many other initiatives cannot, its impact is strongly evidenced-based and it delivers financial benefits far exceeding its costs. These factors put Link Up at the forefront of a range of valuable models and approaches currently being explored to improve outcomes for people in Scotland's most disadvantaged communities.

If you believe the Link Up model and approach can help address the issues faced by the challenged communities you operate in, we would be delighted to explore this with you.

We are proud of what Link Up has achieved and trust that through this paper and ODS' report you can start to get a sense of the opportunity we see in Link Up.

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³ A creative community-builder and mediator that is comfortable taking risks. They care about the local community and value local people as contributors not victims to be saved/issues to be resolved. They have the support, stamina and belief to persevere.

⁴ Strong asset-based principles and a way of working which:

- Starts by asking what's good.
- Is not about enforcing external agendas.
- Gives significant autonomy to develop and flex the approach in-line with the local context.
- Provides flexible funding so ideas can be quickly turned into action.
- Encourages a culture of working round personal and institutional barriers to change.

⁵ Fiona Garven (Director, SCDC), Community Development in the Context of Public Sector Reform, Paper to Royal Society of Edinburgh, April 2014.

WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING ABOUT LINK UP

Stewart Murdoch, Director Leisure & Communities, Dundee City Council

"Link Up Whitfield has integrated well with the strategies being followed by the City Council and other partners. As an evaluator has said, it has had its greatest impact on the support provided to individuals to build their capacity and confidence. Much of this comes down to the ability of the local worker to identify good ideas, projects and people with which to work. I have no doubt that Link Up has made a helpful contribution towards meeting a number of the outcomes set out in the Local Community Plan. What is important is to recognise that this type of work needs sustained long-term support and is dependent on the abilities of a skilled practitioner to work within the community and with the range of agencies already active in the area".

Sir John Elvidge, Carnegie Fellow, lead for Carnegie UK Trust's Enabling State Project

"A key question in the widespread discussion generated by Carnegie UK Trust's work on the Enabling State is how the success of communities in finding ways to increase their own wellbeing can be scaled up and accelerated without smothering the vital role that people have in shaping the activities which are right for them. The Link Up programme makes a useful contribution to exploring that question, particularly through the breadth and variety of the projects supported."

Cormac Russell, Managing Director, Nurture Development

"The essential focus of Link Up has been local citizens; its primary question is deceptively straightforward: 'how can we support them in their development efforts?' Yet it is a question that few institutions authentically ask. The question of most institutional systems both in the Public Sector and increasingly in the Third Sector is: 'how can we get local citizens to participate in our efforts/programmes?'"

Link Up proves that place based ground up community building is impactful and over time can be enduring. In to the future the challenge for those who fund social explorers such as Inspiring Scotland, will be to take stock of four key lessons captured in this evaluation:

- 1. We cannot engage with Communities of place, until we first support the Community Building process, and that has to happen from inside out and be citizen-led. Community Building benefits significantly from the support of a dedicated Community Builder.*
- 2. Place based responses need to move from being peripheral, though interesting from a policy perspective, to being viewed as central and strategic. Asset Based Community Development is fundamentally place based. Asset Based practice cannot hope to be successful in the long run if it is separated from effective Community Development practice; equally Community Development practice cannot expect enduring citizen-led transformation unless it is Asset-based.*
- 3. Commissioning initiatives such as Link Up, means favouring process over outcome, it is a brave statement about where authority should reside. The Link Up initiative is successful primarily because it habitually relocates authority to local residents. Can Commissioners who typically require pre-engagement outcomes to be defined from the start, support organisations that are committed to supporting local grass-roots invention, rather than those that act as the inventors?*
- 4. Start with the assumption that the primary assets for enduring personal, social, economic and environmental well-being are already within communities and that the work of external agencies is to help to reveal those assets and support local people to link them up in a way that makes best sense to them.*

Savvy practitioners across Scotland have worked this way for many years, what is exciting about Link Up is that they are calling attention not to their programme but to their practice and ultimately to the inherent value of a capacity oriented approach to community building. I salute them in their endeavours and look forward to working closing with them in supporting hyper-local, citizen-led initiatives to proliferate across Scotland."